

LOW-BUDGET TARNATION GENERATES HIGH INTEREST

Sundance Preview

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PARK CITY, Utah — In our confessional culture of weblogs, reality television, emo punks, and tell-more memoirs, something like this was bound to happen. Astoria, Queens, resident Jonathan Caouette, 31, has assembled two decades of his life on-screen in a new film called *Tarnation*, which generated a burst of interest at the Sundance Film Festival this week when it was announced that its entire production budget cost less than \$300. The film plays as part of Sundance's "Frontier" section, which is reserved for adventurous work.

Caouette "directed" *Tarnation* on an Apple computer, a gift from a relative, using its built-in iMovie software to compile a narrative from 20 years of footage "starring" the dysfunctional Caouette family of Houston. Most of the shockingly low budget was spent on videotape during the film's lengthy gestation.

Caouette is the product of a harrowing childhood fraught with mental illness, rape, incest, promiscuity, drug addiction, and child abuse (all the requisite elements for a Sundance hit, come to think of it). He began documenting his personal horrors at age 11, acting in homemade short films he shot on the family camcorder. His preadolescent imitation of a mentally exhausted housewife, included in *Tarnation*, is at once hilarious and horrific, encapsulating the film's edgy, voyeuristic allure.

Caouette's schizophrenic mother, Renee, was in and out of hospitals as young Caouette suffered abuse in the foster-care system and later developed an affliction called depersonalization, which involves recurring feelings of being detached from one's body or mental processes. Sufferers of the disorder, which has been linked to epilepsy, have been known to feel as if they're observing their life from a distance. For Caouette, filmmaking felt like a fait accompli.

The rest of *Tarnation* is a feverish collage of still photographs, video and audio diaries, phone messages, dramatic reenactments, '80s pop-culture samples, and random thoughts that run as text across the screen, including the reaction of Caouette's estranged father when he's cold-called by the son he's never known: "You sound gay. Are you gay? You don't have AIDS do you? Because if you have AIDS, I don't want anything to do with you."

Caouette, who is openly gay, worked until recently as a doorman at a Fifth Avenue jewelry store. He presented early footage of *Tarnation* to John Cameron Mitchell after auditioning for a role in the director's follow-up to *Hedwig & The Angry Inch*. Mitchell liked what he saw and contacted Gus Van Sant, who screened an early cut of *Tarnation* and offered his support as executive producer, guaranteeing it attention in the indie world. The \$300 budget spoke for itself.

"I knew something like this would happen," Van Sant said before the festival. "I'm glad it finally has."

If *Capturing the Friedmans* showed moviegoers what sort of engrossing narrative could be shaped out of a box of old home movies unearthed from a Long Island basement, *Tarnation* builds on its promise by costing less than a plane ticket to Park City. And if *Tarnation* finds success beyond Sundance, iMovie could very well ignite the next revolution in independent film.

"A child can pick it up and do it," Caouette says of his filmmaking experience. "I have the feeling there are tons of people out there just like me who have footage like this sitting at home."

Itemized Tarnation budget:

VHS tapes: \$33.75

High 8 tapes: \$149.46

Camera adaptor: \$10.27

Angel wings: \$25

Total: \$218.48